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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/IPA, SEMEP
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SUBJECT: VICE FM DEFENDS SYRIA'S "PEACEFUL OBJECTIVES"
AGAINST ISRAELI "THREATS"

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (SBU) Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad convened representatives of Western Hemisphere and African diplomatic missions February 4 to review and echo FM Muallim's comments to the press the day before concerning Syria's view of Israeli rhetorical "threats." Muallim separately briefed Arab and European ambassadors on the same subject. Media accounts of the February 3 press conference with Spanish FM Moratinos quoted Muallim as warning Israel "not to test Syria's power, since you know the war will reach your cities." (NOTE: Moratinos, on the other hand, commented that he "had not heard war drums" when visiting Israel earlier in the week. END NOTE.) Muallim also urged the Israelis to "return to reason, follow the path of peace ... and implement the requirements of peace fairly and comprehensively."

¶2. (C) Miqdad framed his briefing as a necessary means of presenting the Syrian viewpoint after an "escalation" from Israel in the form of verbal threats from Army Chief of Staff Ashkenazi, Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Barak. Ashkenazi, he said, had not contented himself with military maneuvers but had "tried to make a state of war" by threatening to launch an attack against Syria. This threat, "and previous ones against Lebanon and Gaza," led FM Muallim to conclude that Syria had to respond to Israel's "allegations." Meantime, said Miqdad, PM Netanhayu was blocking peace talks by insisting on no preconditions (i.e., according to Syria, disregarding the requirements imposed by UN Security Council resolutions and the Roadmap) and Barak was talking a double game, saying one thing publicly but another in private.

¶3. (C) In contrast, Miqdad portrayed Syria as having "defined its objectives as peaceful" and exerted efforts to solve the conflict with Israel by peaceful means. Frequently citing Syrian assurances to SEMEP Mitchell regarding Damascus' desire and readiness for peace, he pilloried Israel as "the only party standing against international legitimacy and peaceful solutions." That is why, Miqdad asserted, FM Muallim had correctly pointed out that the essential question is why Israel is not working for peace. Syria does not seek armed conflict but is ready to defend itself. Should war come, he concluded dramatically, "Syrian mothers and wives won't be the only ones crying" and both regional and world peace and security would be in danger.

¶4. (C) Comment: The SARG probably felt it could not be seen as failing to respond after wide media coverage of remarks by Israeli leaders interpreted as provocative in the Arab world generally and vis-a-vis Syria specifically. The jarring tone

of that response underscores that Syria still often defaults to the rhetorical mode of "resistance," if not outright confrontation. Though some attendees at Miqdad's briefing professed themselves worried afterwards about the prospects for imminent conflict, other diplomats, such as the French ambassador in his readout yesterday to CDA of the visit of Senator Philippe Marini, dismissed the saber-rattling as "just noise." In his prepared remarks Miqdad complained about the difficulty of knowing Israel's true intentions; for the moment, and at least until Syrian-Israeli talks resume in some form, the same must be said occasionally of his own government's public stances.

HUNTER